

A Nine-Iron and a Prayer

by Andrew DeHaan

I dig the screwdriver into the back of her head because I don't have a knife, and it works better than the key I used earlier. I make my mark—a messy, but simple “A”—in Eleanor and move in to Betsy. I search her cheap, laminated top for a serial number, and there it is, in the soundhole, up against the neck joint. I set her on my lap and strum the C chord like it's something new.

They break into my apartment early in the day, when each of the four living here are at work or school. We live on the second floor of a century-old house on the corner of Fuller Ave. and Sherman, Grand Rapids, Michigan. They get in through the window by the back deck. Popping off the screen, they shove the window open. The plastic latches easily crack with enough force. The however-many-of-them scuttle in and go for street value.

They did not take my guitars, Eleanor and Betsy. They did not take my books of poetry. They did not take my beer, or my black desktop with stickers slapped on it. Nothing of much importance to me is gone. My roommates did not fair so well, however, but we realize these are just things, and the weight of things is small. After all, all I need is love. Still, I am here making distinguishing marks in my guitars in case this happens again and things get more personal.

Grand Rapids is a small city. As of the 2000 census, there are less than two hundred thousand people within the city limits. It's one of the reasons why I love living here: we have the city spirit—every wall is alive with something, but those walls, they're easy to get around. Despite Grand Rapids being small, the city still has double the national average of burglary. Even though burglary has been on the decline since 2001, the yearly amount of robberies has shot up. If thievery happens in a home while no one is there, such as our situation, this is burglary. If thievery happens in our house and I get a knife up to my throat, this is robbery. There is a distinct difference. With this rise in violence I wonder what there is to combat it. What stops violence? Is it more violence, or active, non-violent refusal? Is it the curse or the

blessing that slows it down?

A week after our place gets trashed and our stuff stolen, my roommate Mike is sitting at home alone, watching Cartoon Network, when he hears a loud noise. He steps out of his room to investigate, the floor creaking under his left foot as it always does. He turns into the kitchen to see the back door and four kids struggling to shove open the adjacent window, with the other pounding a crater into the doorknob with a hammer. He recognizes our neighbors. All 120 pounds of Mike flex and bulge. “YOU MOTHERFUCKING KIDS GET OFF OUR FUCKING DECK YOU’RE DEAD.” he screams, flailing and chasing them away. Huffing with rage, he flips out his cellphone and calls the cops. They come and ask their questions, write on their notepads, they wish Mike well and leave like ex-lovers that fall off the earth.

That night I come home and Mike tells me the story. I go to bed with visions. I am on the verge of a panic attack. My heart wavers. Chilled sweat forms between my thighs. I am thinking about what I would do if there were a next time. Mike said he was getting his nine-iron out of his car. He said he agrees with all that non-violence shit I talk about, but sometimes a golf club is a quicker, more cathartic solution. I begin to mouth the threats I will make. I begin to recite the Beatitudes, then the Beatles. I am torn between checking the would-be burglars over the back railing—watching their heads split open like various produce on the cement slab—and wailing, tearing my clothes, spreading ash, channeling the frustration through the throat and the mournful dancing. I teeter. I sing softly the songs my mother did by my bedside to calm the war between my heart and my clenched fist.

Mahatmas Gandhi said that “Victory attained by violence is tantamount to a defeat, for it is momentary.” Truth is, if one of us were to retaliate violently to the intruder, they probably would dislike us more. Their friends would find out and we would be left with just our skivvies in no time. The sides would be split without either realizing the humanity of the other. While there may be retribution in taking a chipping wedge to the violator’s eyesockets, it would only leave me with temporary satisfaction and stained blue jeans. This is where non-violence prevails, right? Maybe not so easily.

Take Sister Dorothy Stang, for example. A nun in Brazil, Stang fought for the rights of the poor and oppressed, and refused to give in to criminal gangs that wanted to take over the farmland and deforest the entire area. Unlike many aboriginal tribes that vanish with deforestation, the tribes in Brazil had someone to rally around. She was quoted as saying “I don’t want to flee, nor do I want to abandon the battle of these farmers who live without any protection in the forest. They have the sacrosanct right to aspire to a better life on land where they can live and work with dignity while respecting the environment,” before her untimely death on February 12, 2005. That day Sister Stang was reading her Bible and heading for a meeting in the Amazon jungle when two gunmen approached her and shot her. Their guns drawn, their trigger fingers shaking with adrenaline, Dorothy read from Matthew: “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied.” They fire their guns and she falls, silent.

As I sit here today in my room, weeks after any break-ins, I admire Dorothy. What more is there than to do than admire her vigilance? Her defiance to participate in the game of controlling your fellow woman/man is inspiring. She died for something that mattered, something selfless, unlike so many found clutching their valuables in some padded casket.

I sit here, with the sun streaming in through blinds, my tea warming up my empty belly, reading *Leaves of Grass*, and I wonder if she would do anything different if she lived with me in Grand Rapids. I wonder if she would have been so ready to die if she didn’t have a thing to die for. Is it worth it to give up your life to the hands of some young punk? Does your premeditated murder possibly mean that you mean more to the world? Does anyone know?

Soon, I will hear someone at the back door with a sledgehammer, breaking off the knob. My hair will stand, followed by the rest of me. My head will be flooded with the tidal wave of absence. My muscles will know no thought. They will move without command. I will grab a frying pan and a steak knife. I will open the door to see a face. I will not recognize it as human. No one will when I’m done. I will never blink as swing and connect.

Or, maybe I will hear the same noise, stand just the same. Walk down the hall, ideas overflowing like a mad scientist’s beaker. I will take off my pants, then my shirt. I will come to

the door completely naked. Opening up the door, she or he will catch sight of the snake and the jungle. “Hey, what’s up?” I will say, sticking out my pelvis. They will shove a steak knife up my ribcage seven times. I will bleed to death on my deck, naked as I came, the blood seeping onto the red-painted wood. The blood will drip down. The police will come within two hours. They will never find the killer.

Or, possibly, I will strip and taunt. With a daunted face, he or she will be startled, taking several steps back before leaving frantically, worried about the state of the world we live in. I will sound my barbaric yawp, knowing she or he will never be seen around here again. I will go back inside and finish my tea in peace, back in the lap of ol’ Walt.